The International History Review

ISSN: 0707-5332 (Print) 1949-6540 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rinh20

For Democracy, Not Hypocrisy: World War and Race Relations in the United States, 1914–1919

Jonathan Rosenberg

To cite this article: Jonathan Rosenberg (1999) For Democracy, Not Hypocrisy: World War and Race Relations in the United States, 1914–1919, The International History Review, 21:3, 592-625, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.1999.9640870

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07075332.1999.9640870

Published online: 01 Dec 2010.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 110

View related articles

Citing articles: 2 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rinh20

Download by: [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] **Date:** 18 October 2017, At: 02:44

JONATHAN ROSENBERG

For Democracy, Not Hypocrisy: World War and Race Relations in the United States, 1914-1919

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

On the morning of 4 December 1918, thousands gathered on the Manhattan waterfront to watch the president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, set sail for France and the peace conference at Paris. Five destroyers escorted Wilson's ship, the *George Washington*, out of the harbour to the open sea. Standing on the ship's bridge, the president waved and tipped his hat in response to the tribute paid by the adoring crowd. Aboard the ship were scores of advisers who, with Wilson, hoped to transform the practice of international relations and improve the lives of people everywhere. With the First World War over, the mood was festive and expectant. The United States was triumphant and its president was off to Europe to reconstruct the world.

Little more than four months after Woodrow Wilson sailed for Europe, in April 1919, William Monroe Trotter followed him. Trotter was already a legend among African-Americans, owing to actions as a race reformer which included highly publicized confrontations with Booker T. Washington and Wilson himself.[1] Chairman of the National Equal Rights League, a black-run civil rights organization, and editor of the *Boston Guardian*, Trotter believed the peace conference, with its talk of democracy and self-determination, would provide a stage from which to tell the world about the plight of blacks in the United States.

When the state department refused Trotter a passport, he obtained in disguise a seaman's passport and took a job on a freighter bound for Le Havre, where he jumped ship. In Paris, for several weeks he bombarded the French and foreign press, and delegates to the conference – including Wilson and his aide Colonel Edward House – with letters and memoranda aimed at 'letting the world know that the Negro race wants full liberty and equality of rights, as the fruit of the world war'. In his writings, Trotter extended Wilson's concept of self-determination to include peoples other

1 See S. R. Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York, 1970), chs. 2, 5.

The International History Review, xxi. 3: September 1999, pp. 569-852.
CN ISSN 0707-5332 © *The International History Review*. All International Rights Reserved.

than the inhabitants of the European states. Black Americans, 'an ethnical minority denied equal rights ... are asking that we be accorded only what everyone else has.'[1]

A the end of May, Trotter sent Wilson an open letter, published in the French press and cabled to the United States, in which he echoed many other race reformers' writings by tying the struggle abroad to the struggle at home. Written in response to the lynching of a black man in Missouri, the letter pointed to Wilson's Memorial Day address (given the day before) in which he spoke of the brave American boys sent to France to die for democracy. Reminding Wilson that many of them were black, Trotter asked him whether he was prepared to work for justice in the United States as well as overseas. These 'lads ... gallant and loyal ... [had] died in vain,' unless Wilson would 'grant to their kin and race at home protection of right and life in the world peace agreement': Congress must make lynching a federal crime. Trotter closed with the phrase, 'Yours for World Democracy'.[2]

Trotter returned to the United States in mid-July 1919 from a trip, however quixotic, which suggests that race reformers looked to the First World War and the peace settlement to help ameliorate the condition of blacks in the United States. The reformers believed the war, by providing blacks with the opportunity to serve their country in a noble cause, would improve the lives of African-Americans. Beyond this, the terms Wilson used to frame the war and peace – that the United States could construct an international order based on democracy and self-determination – were seized upon by race reformers in search of a domestic order based on democracy and equality. They compared the struggle abroad to the one at home, tailored the rhetoric of race reform to fit Wilsonianism, and borrowed Wilson's rhetoric and applied it to their domestic agenda. Just as Wilson hoped the war and the peace settlement could help the United States to remake the world, race reformers believed the same events could help to advance the quest for racial justice in the United States.

Reform leaders believed the movement's success demanded the articulation of a powerful message, and they reflected often how best to vitalize their supporters and persuade their countrymen that the cause was just.[3] This article explores the way race reformers framed their message during the First World War, and made the international conflict – and Wilsonian ideas specifically – central to the language of reform. It also considers why

1 *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 July 1919, p. 14.

2 *New York Age*, 6 Sept. 1919, p. 4.

3 For a full discussion, see J. Rosenberg, '"How Far the Promised Land?" World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam' (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard, 1997).

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

the content of that message is critical to the reform enterprise, and the impact the reformers' strategy had on the movement. The sources come mainly from the public record the movement generated, including speeches and resolutions passed at annual conferences and other important gatherings; columns and editorials published in black newspapers, journals, and magazines; and pamphlets, essays, and sermons.

* * *

While several organizations were working to improve the plight of black Americans early in the century, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, which was becoming the best known, serves as the starting point for an understanding of how race reformers responded to the First World War. The NAACP's founders and leaders, mainly whites in the early days, conform to Richard Hofstadter's description of the Progressive-era type: upper-middle-class professionals devoted to alleviating the social and political ills of a country transformed by industrialization, immigration, and urbanization.[1]

As the NAACP achieved pre-eminence, its leadership focused on a few key objectives, especially the fight against lynching, on which it spent most of its money and large amounts of time and energy lobbying for federal legislation. Its other targets included unfair treatment in housing, education, commerce, and voting. As early as 1910, for example, the NAACP fought against segregation in housing in Baltimore, and in a disfranchisement case, it helped in 1915 to challenge the constitutionality of the 'grandfather clause', a legal play that facilitated discrimination in voting. Nonetheless, events abroad soon caused the NAACP to reorder its priorities.

According to George Bowling in George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*, 'If the war didn't happen to kill you it was bound to start you thinking.'[2] The race reformers did think about the war, but, at first, few of them perceived the link between the overseas conflict and the struggle for racial justice. Assuming that Wilson would be mistaken in declaring war, with few exceptions they supported neutrality.

One of neutrality's strongest supporters was Oswald Garrison Villard, a key founder of the NAACP, who mixed journalism with social activism;[3] another was Mary White Ovington, who from 1909 until the 1940s articulated policy, raised money, helped set up new branches, and served as a 'buoyant spirit of tenacity in the face of persistent racism'.[4] To Ovington,

1 See R. Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955).

2 G. Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (New York, 1950), p. 144.

3 For Villard's role as foreign policy critic, see M. Wreszin, *Oswald Garrison Villard: Pacifist at War* (Bloomington, 1965), pp. 48-55, and D. J. Humes, *Oswald Garrison Villard, Liberal of the 1920s* (Syracuse, 1920), pp. 193-208.

4 D. W. Cryer, 'Mary White Ovington and the Rise of the NAACP' (Ph.D. dissertation, Minnesota,

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

war was barbaric, a destroyer of human life, economic prosperity, and, perhaps most important, idealism. Nonetheless, after the United States entered the war in April 1917, she recognized that it would enable 'the Negro [to] become a part of the country as he had not been before'.[1] She later remarked: when the Europeans 'pointed their guns at each other they did more for the advancement and emancipation of [the Negro] race than they did for any other people in the world'.[2]

While nearly all of the leading reformers opposed the war and were slow to recognize the opportunities it might provide,[3] two race activists, Joel Spingarn and W. E. B. Du Bois, saw early on that it might alter the state of race relations in the United States. Although they disagreed about the origins of the war, both tied the struggle abroad to the struggle at home.

Spingarn, the son of Jewish immigrants, was one of the leading figures in the civil rights movement from 1910 until the eve of the Second World War.[4] Early in the war, he criticized Germany's aggressiveness and, believing US intervention to be both just and unavoidable, advocated a policy of preparedness. In January 1915, he tied the war to the condition of black Americans in a speech in which he stated that 'the real cause of the present war in Europe was a contempt for weaker people' shown in the desire for colonization. He then turned to the oppression of blacks in the South, which he attributed to racist Southerners in Congress.[5]

If Spingarn tied the First World War to US race relations, Du Bois went further, evaluating its origins in explicitly racial terms. Not only was Du Bois the NAACP's foremost black American, he was also the most important race reformer of the first half of the century. With a prodigious intellect, remarkable literary gifts, and an enormous capacity for hard work, he had grappled with the ideas of Booker T. Washington, would investigate the treatment of blacks in France after the First World War, and file a petition on behalf of black Americans at an infant United Nations in 1947.[6]

Having joined the NAACP in 1910, Du Bois played a leading role in its affairs until 1934, serving on the board of directors and as director of

---

1977), pp. 259-60.

1 Quoted in M. W. Ovington, *Black and White Sat Down Together: The Reminiscences of an NAACP Founder*, ed. R. E. Luker (New York, 1995), p. 85.

2 Quoted in M. W. Ovington, *Portraits in Color* (New York, 1927), p. 140.

3 W. B. Hixson, *Moorfield Storey and the Abolitionist Tradition* (New York, 1972); C. Chatfield, 'World War I and the Liberal Pacifist in the United States', *American Historical Review*, lxxv (1970), 1920-37; and J. A. Thompson, *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (Cambridge, 1987).

4 See B. J. Ross, *J. E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP, 1911-39* (New York, 1972) and M. Van Deusen, *J. E. Spingarn* (New York, 1971).

5 *Cleveland Gazette*, 23 Jan. 1915, p. 2.

6 For Du Bois's early career, see D. L. Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York, 1993).

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

publicity and research. As editor from 1910 of the association's monthly journal, the *Crisis*, he turned the publication into the United States's leading journal of opinion on race relations and used it throughout the war to tie the fighting to the cause of reform.[1] As early as November 1914, a long editorial asserted that the interests of black Americans would best be served by an Allied victory, a surprising statement from a man who believed the morals and motives of all European states to be alike:

> Many colored persons, and persons interested in them, may easily make the mistake of supposing that the present war is far removed from the color problem of America ... This attitude is a mistake. The present war in Europe is one of the great disasters due to race and color prejudice and it but foreshadows greater disasters in the future ... [An Allied victory] would at least leave the plight of the colored races no worse than now. Indeed, considering the fact that black Africans and brown Indians and yellow Japanese are fighting for France and England it may be that they will come out of this frightful welter of blood with new ideas about the essential equality of all men. [A German victory] means the triumph of every force calculated to subordinate darker peoples. It would mean triumphant militarism, autocratic and centralized government ... The triumph of this idea would mean a crucifixion of darker peoples unparalleled in history. As colored Americans then, and as Americans who fear race prejudice as the greatest of War-makers, our sympathies ... should be with France and England; not that they have conquered race prejudice, but they have at least begun to realize its cost and evil.[2]

Du Bois attributed the war's origins to race, specifically to the European exploitation of 'darker peoples'. Although he was certain a German victory would harm black people everywhere by sanctioning the racialism inherent in the German conception of the state, he was less certain about the benefits to be derived from an Allied victory. Nonetheless, the 'colored races' fighting on the Allied side might emerge from the struggle with a heightened sense of the equality of all people. Similarly, Du Bois would later argue that the war could vitalize black Americans, emboldening them to struggle for their rights as citizens.

The *Crisis* serves as a window onto Du Bois's thinking about the war. In December 1914, he castigated those Americans who congratulated themselves for remaining at peace while the rest of the world was fighting. Declaring that 'wars of peace are often quite as horrible as the murder of war,' he pointed to the United States's 'unenviable and shameful notoriety of being the country where murder is more prevalent than in any civilized land'. He attributed the violence of both whites against blacks and blacks

[1] See E. Rudwick, 'W. E. B. Du Bois in the Role of "Crisis" Editor', *Journal of Negro History*, xliii (1958), 214-40.
[2] *Crisis* (Nov. 1914), pp. 28-30.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

against whites to the 'atmosphere of ... hatred' growing in the 'miasma of race prejudice'.[1]

Du Bois did not write idly; instead, he believed his work for the *Crisis* to be crucial to the NAACP's success and the cause of race reform in the United States. Late in 1914, he told Spingarn:

> What I am working for with the *Crisis* is to make the NAACP *possible*. To-day it is *not* possible. We can piddle on, we can beat time, we can do a few small obvious things: but the great blow – the freeing of ten million – and of other millions whom they pull down – that means power and organization on a tremendous scale. The men who will fight in these ranks must be educated and the *Crisis* can train them: not simply in its words, but in its manner, its pictures, its conception of life.[2]

For Du Bois, the *Crisis* served as a monthly call to arms, which could help transform US society.

With goals similar to Du Bois's, Spingarn approached the task of reform differently. Like Du Bois, Spingarn believed that the war could help the blacks' cause, but whereas Du Bois used the war to strike out rhetorically against racial injustice in the United States, Spingarn took the more practical approach, convinced the war could provide concrete opportunities for black progress. He welcomed news in January 1917 from the commander of the eastern department of the army, Major General Leonard Wood, that, if two hundred black Americans applied, the army would set up a four-week training camp to prepare them for military service. A black officer corps, capable of leading black troops in battle, might also lead the struggle against discrimination in the military and, more significantly, US society.

In February, in response to Wood's offer, Spingarn published an open letter to the 'Educated Colored Men of the United States', in which he urged them to seize the 'opportunities for leadership'. They should no longer 'remain in the background' but 'come forward to assume your right places as leaders of American life.' While not everyone could become a leader, anyone with the capacity for leadership should seize the 'opportunity to test and display it'. Despite his opposition to segregation, Spingarn argued that the crisis of the war allowed for no debate: 'It seems to me that there is only one thing for you to do at this juncture and that is to get the training to fit you to be officers, however and wherever and whenever this training may be obtained.'[3] In a letter to William Pickens, the dean of

1 *Crisis* (Dec. 1914), p. 80. See also Du Bois, 'The African Roots of the War', *Atlantic Monthly*, cxv (1915), 707-14.

2 Du Bois to Spingarn, 28 Oct. 1914 [University of Massachusetts], Du Bois Papers [microfilm ed.], reel 4.

3 'Military Training Camp for Colored Men: An Open Letter from Dr J. E. Spingarn', 15 Feb. 1917,

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

Morgan College and who would shortly join the NAACP, Spingarn observed that with 'two or three hundred properly trained officers, we can make a fight for a wide-open army; we can fight against segregation itself if we only have the men to put forward to fight it with.'[1]

Although segregated training aroused strong opposition among black Americans, some prominent black figures, including Du Bois, supported the proposed training camp. One of them was Lieutenant Colonel Charles Young, the nation's highest-ranking black soldier, who explained that 'when the storm is past we can take up the idealism of the cause.'[2] Pickens, in a reply to Spingarn published on the front page of Baltimore's *Afro-American*, claimed that 'it would be a decided advantage to the promotion and rise of colored men in the army. As mere scattered individuals in a white training camp, any white man could be easily jumped over their heads. With a separate and distinct proposition, such as the one you mention, this species of discrimination would hardly be possible ... I hope the thing will succeed.'[3]

On 19 May, the war department approved the training camp, and in June the first black officer-cadets assembled at Des Moines. When the decision to open the camp was made, the *Crisis* declared: 'We have won! The camp is granted; we shall have 1,000 Negro officers in the United States Army.'[4] (One month earlier, the NAACP had officially decided to support the camp.) The following October, the first six hundred cadets received their commissions as officers. Spingarn wrote to Du Bois: 'You know how much I have worked for this thing ... [Many thought it] a preposterous dream ... And now the dream has come true. There will be many more officers, when these have proved that our faith was justified; and these men have the solemn duty of proving our faith to the whole world.'[5] In battling for the segregated officer-training camp, Spingarn, who used the war to achieve tangible gains for black Americans, illustrated the

---

[Howard University, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Joel] Spingarn Papers, box 13, fo. 534; published in the Baltimore *Afro-American*, 24 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

1 Baltimore *Afro-American*, 10 March 1917, p. 1. For some months, the NAACP took no official position on the matter, but given its historic opposition to segregation, Spingarn's plan was not popular within the association. Nor did the plan win much favour in the country's leading black newspapers. See, e.g., *Chicago Defender*, 7 April 1917; *Gazette* (Cleveland), 24 March 1917; *Afro-American* (Baltimore), 24 Feb., 17 March 1917; *New York Age*, 1, 22 March 1917.

2 *Gazette*, 31 March 1917, p. 1.

3 Pickens to Spingarn, 27 Feb. 1917, Spingarn Papers, box 9, fo. 354; W. Pickens, *Bursting Bonds* (Bloomington, 1991; orig. 1923), pp. 73-4. See also, 'Howard University in the War – A Record of Patriotic Service', *Howard University Record*, xiii (April 1919), 159-78; A. E. Barbeau and F. Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I* (Philadelphia, 1974), pp. 56-69; and G. W. Patton, *War and Race: The Black Officer in the American Military, 1915-41* (Westport, 1981).

4 *Crisis* (June 1917), p. 61; NAACP board of directors mtg., 14 May 1917, Du Bois Papers, reel 5.

5 Spingarn to Du Bois, 17 Oct. 1917, Du Bois Papers, reel 5.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

extent to which reformers looked to the war to advance the cause of racial justice.

The same assumption underpinned the work of another prominent voice among race reformers during the war years: that of black columnist James Weldon Johnson, who joined the NAACP in late 1916 (he became acting secretary in May 1917) and whose widely read column, 'Views and Reviews', appeared in the *New York Age*. His views on the war are significant because several thousand black Americans read his column every week.[1]

As early as June 1915, Johnson introduced race into his discussion of the war. Commenting on the negotiations with Germany after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Johnson asked where black America should stand if the United States decided to go to war. The answer he gave was simple: as they always had in the past, black Americans should give 'unquestioned loyalty'. As 'this is our country as much as it is the country of any other class of American citizens,' blacks owed the same duty to their country as all loyal Americans. Should they refuse to fight, they would surrender the rights they claimed as theirs.[2]

In February 1917, Johnson introduced a second theme that was to recur more and more often. He suggested that Americans, and Wilson, were at best hypocritical and, at worst, morally bankrupt:

> It is worth while to think about the hypocrisy of this country. Here we are holding up our hands in horror at German 'atrocities', at what is being done in Belgium and at what is being done on the high seas, while the wholesale murder of American citizens on American soil by bloodthirsty American mobs hardly brings forth a word of comment. We have a president who still continues to talk about humanity, about bringing peace and righteousness to all the nations of the earth, but who has yet to utter one word against this outraging of humanity within the territory over which he presides. Americans, in their smug hypocrisy, look upon the Turks for their treatment of the Armenians as cruel barbarians; but ... the American lynching record makes the Turkish treatment of Armenians look like deeds of mercy ... It is our duty to ourselves and to those who come after us to cry out against lynching and every other form of wrong that is practiced against us.[3]

By drawing a direct parallel between the violation of human rights overseas and at home in order to clarify the nature of the domestic struggle for reform, Johnson sought to strengthen the case for change. Americans, no doubt distressed by the inhumane acts described in their daily newspapers, had no need to look overseas to find them; they occurred all the

1 See E. Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (Chicago, 1973).
2 *New York Age*, 3 June 1915, p. 4.
3 Ibid., 15 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

time in the United States. Inexplicably, the 'wholesale murder' of Americans by 'bloodthirsty mobs' was of little interest to their fellow countrymen or to Wilson, who sought to bring 'peace and righteousness' to foreigners, while oblivious of the inhumanities practised at home.[1]

* * *

By the spring of 1917, events overseas, especially Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, made it increasingly difficult and at last impossible for the United States to remain neutral. In the months after the declaration of war in April, race reformers began to proclaim more and more loudly that the struggle abroad was inseparable from the one at home. In describing the United States's goal, Wilson had declared on 2 April 1917 that the nation would seek

> to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power and to set up amongst the really free and self-governed peoples such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth ensure the observance of those principles ... We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among ... individual citizens ... [W]e shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts – for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.[2]

Rarely has a US president justified war in such idealistic terms: the United States would go to war to help build a world that shared the United States's devotion to democracy and freedom. According to Wilson, the United States fought for 'the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples ... [the] world must be made safe for democracy.' For the race reformers, however, these war aims had a significance Wilson could not have imagined.

In the first issue of the *Crisis* published after the United States entered the war, Du Bois expressed guarded support for belligerency. While war was 'an awful thing' and 'the end of civilization', 'German dominion is worse,' as was the 'rape of Belgium and France': war was preferable to slavery. The United States was fighting in the hope that everyone might 'gain a world where war shall be no more'.[3]

1 *New York Age*, 15 Feb., 29 March 1917, p. 4.
2 *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. A. S. Link (Princeton, 1986), xli. 519-27.
3 *Crisis* (May 1917), p. 8.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

In supporting US intervention, Du Bois paralleled events at home with those abroad. On the same page as this editorial, readers encountered a brief piece entitled 'Loyalty', in which Du Bois excoriated Southerners for concocting stories about the alleged disloyalty of black Americans, which, he claimed, would lead to martial law, and thus foreclose the swelling black migration northwards. 'Any tale or propaganda by which the Bourbon South can get the country to believe the Negro is a menace would play straight into the hands of the slaveholders ... [But] the Negro is far more loyal to this country and its ideals than the white southern American.' Though 'enslaved, raped, and despised', blacks had continued to uphold the country's ideals. Behind 'the German mask is the grinning skeleton of the Southern slave driver'.[1] By juxtaposing German atrocities with Southern atrocities, Du Bois hoped to clarify the nature of race relations in the United States, and to show that it was as necessary to combat racial tyranny at home as German tyranny abroad.

The NAACP soon recognized that the war might prove useful in the struggle against racial persecution. On 9 April, the association's board of directors voted unanimously to 'oppose and take every feasible step to prevent any discrimination' against blacks in the military or anywhere else in the country, despite the opposition to the war, and specifically conscription, of several board members, including Ovington and Villard. Ovington declared that every member and 'every branch must fight against allowing the Negro to be put in any position less than that of a citizen.'[2]

A few weeks later, in mid-May, the NAACP sponsored a conference at Washington that included its own members and members of other black organizations. The two-day affair, attended by more than seven hundred delegates, adopted a set of resolutions which show how race reformers thought the war could help their cause. The resolutions declared that the war's origins lay in race hatred and European exploitation of the world's 'darker and backward people'; that permanent peace demanded government by consent throughout the world, particularly among the natives of Asia, Africa, the West Indies, and the black population of the United States. The conference urged black Americans to support the war effort as a 'fight for eventual world liberation' because the United States belonged more to blacks than to those who 'lynch, disfranchise, and segregate'. It tied demands that blacks should have the right to serve their country and to receive the training they needed to lead troops in battle, to the standard list of race reforms: an end to lynching, the right to vote (for men and

1 *Crisis* (May 1917), p. 8.
2 NAACP board of directors mtg., 9 April 1917 [Library of Congress], NAACP Papers [microfilm ed.], pt. 1, reel 1.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

women), the abolition of segregated railroad cars, the repeal of segregation ordinances, and equal access to all public institutions. The resolutions concluded by linking the war to the creation of a more just and democratic society at home: black Americans, by contributing their 'unfaltering loyalty' to the national effort, hoped to aid the cause of 'world peace and self-government ... neither the world nor America [could] be happy and democratic so long as twelve million Americans are lynched, disfranchised, and insulted.'[1] Support for the war effort did not supersede the demand for justice at home.

The notion that US belligerency might serve as an instrument of social change also informed the NAACP's *Seventh Annual Report*, published in 1917. Entitled 'Freeing America', it described a world 'in travail', and expressed the hope that the 'present horror of war' might lead to 'a new birth of freedom' in compensation for the carnage. The United States's freedom-bearing mission abroad would be fraudulent without a similar transformation at home:

> Now America comes forward to help freedom in the world. There is but one difficulty that ... must give every American pause. If we bring new freedom to the world, we must bring it with pure hearts and high ideals; yet we all know that right here we have been burning men alive, we have been torturing even the innocent; we have let democratic government die in a third of the land; we have harbored caste ... [We ask] that America so clear her conscience that she can fight for the world's good with clean hands.

Not only did the report tie events abroad to social reform at home, but it also introduced the idea that the twelve million black Americans were being vitalized by the war. The 'new spiritual whirling in the breasts of Negro-Americans' was attributed to the black migration to northern industrial cities; the potentially liberating experience of military service in Europe; or, if that were prohibited, to the important economic role blacks would play by replacing whites who were serving abroad as soldiers. The war would inspire 'a tremendous inner uplift'.[2]

Unquestionably, the most important development in the vocabulary of the race reformers during the First World War was the appropriation of the Wilsonian vocabulary of democracy and freedom: in speeches, articles, and personal correspondence, they insisted that democracy at home was needed to ensure democracy abroad. They played repeatedly on the paradox of an oppressive regime, led by a president who had buttressed

1 *Crisis* (May 1917), p. 7; June 1917, pp. 59-60.

2 Between 1910 and 1920, the black population in northern cities increased by 600 per cent in Detroit, 300 per cent in Cleveland, and nearly 150 per cent in Chicago: F. Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-20* (New York, 1975), pp. 68-9; *Seventh Annual Report of the NAACP* (New York, 1917).

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

segregation in his own government, fighting abroad for the liberation of oppressed peoples.[1]

Ovington addressed the question of American hypocrisy in the *Crisis* in July 1917. After noting that the Allies were 'fighting for Democracy against Autocracy and Militarism', she explored the meaning of democracy, raising questions that led her readers to one conclusion. Is it democracy, she asked, 'to treat a part of the population as not entitled to advancement? Is it to deny it the right to vote or to have representation? ... Is it to set it apart in a ghetto? ... Is it to deny it the right to trial, visiting upon its members torture and death?' Ovington answered that this was not democracy, but despotism; that unless the US government, 'the champion of democracy', enforced the Fifteenth Amendment and allowed its 'men of color [to] stand before the world as citizens', the United States would be seen as 'a laughing stock to its enemies'.[2] To distinguish itself from its enemies and to maintain its international credibility, the United States must abolish tyranny at home.

Rarely a month passed during the period of US belligerency in which the *Crisis* did not expose its growing readership to the idea that the war was critically important in the crusade for racial justice. The tone of Du Bois's editorials was optimistic; in his view, the world stood on the threshold of enormous change, of which peoples of colour would be the principal beneficiaries. Black Americans, especially, were poised to make great strides:

> We are facing a new world. Never again are we going to cope with the same conditions and the same social forces that we have faced in the last half-century ... [N]ew forces have been loosed and a new situation has arisen. It is the business of the American Negro not to sit idly by and see this rearrangement of the world, hoping that something will come out of it of good for him. It is rather his business actually to put himself into the turmoil and work effectively for a new democracy that shall know no color.[3]

If Du Bois did not always make clear precisely *how* the war would improve race relations at home and abroad, his writings left little doubt that he believed the conflict would transform the lives of peoples of colour everywhere. In the summer of 1918, he wrote that the war was not only an end, but also 'a Beginning. Never again will darker people of the world occupy just the place they have before.' After discussing the benefits the war would bring to the inhabitants of China, India, Egypt, and Africa, he

1 N. J. Weiss, 'The Negro and the New Freedom: Fighting Wilsonian Segregation', *Political Science Quarterly*, lxxxiv (1969), 61-79.
2 *Crisis* (July 1917), pp. 115-16.
3 *Crisis* (Aug. 1917), p. 165.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

spoke of the benefits to black Americans: 'Out of this war will rise … an American Negro with the right to vote and the right to work and the right to live without insult.' Although the changes would not be achieved immediately, they were 'written in the stars'.[1]

Du Bois often claimed that the war had a particular meaning for black Americans, owing to the United States's special obligations. In September 1917, he declared that the United States should 'enter this war for Liberty with clean hands. May no blood-smeared garments bind our feet when we rise to make the world safe for democracy.' Concluding a plea for racial justice, Du Bois sounded almost Wilsonian, albeit with one crucial difference: 'We Americans, black and white, are the servants of all mankind and ministering to a greater, fairer heaven. Let us be true to our mission. No land that loves to lynch "niggers" can lead the hosts of Almighty God.'[2]

Du Bois did not restrict the *Crisis* to his own views, but provided a forum for others: poems, letters, clippings from papers throughout the country, and original essays. In August 1917, a letter from 'An Asiatic Gentleman', placed prominently on the first editorial page, touched on many of the ideas that appeared regularly. Alluding to recent race riots in the Midwest and other examples of 'blind race and color prejudice of the worst possible kind', the author said he was 'shocked beyond description' at the treatment of black Americans by white Americans 'intoxicated with power [–] brute force in their eyes stands for manliness.' Turning from injustice at home to events abroad, the author set the oppression of blacks against the backdrop of the world war: 'There can be no democracy and peace in the world so long as color and race prejudice reign supreme as they do now. Yet the colored men of Asia, Africa, and America … [are] engaged in fighting for the allies and the United States in making the world safe for democracy! Oh! the hypocrisy of the whole thing! It burns my very soul.' In conclusion, he offered financial support to the NAACP and assured Du Bois that he was 'one with you in your struggle for your rights as members of the human race'.[3]

War poetry, too, sometimes made its way into the journal, and even if not of high quality, undoubtedly moved *Crisis* readers. Race was central to most of the poems, a good example of which is 'A Sonnet to Negro Soldiers'. Dedicated to the all-black 92nd Division, the poem reads:

1 *Crisis* (June 1918), p. 60.

2 *Crisis* (Sept. 1917), pp. 216-17. For Du Bois's claim that African-Americans had a special interest in the outcome of the war, see M. Ellis, '"Closing Ranks and Seeking Honors": W. E. B. Du Bois in World War I', *Journal of American History*, lxxix (1992), 96-124; W. Jordan, '"The Damnable Dilemma": African-American Accommodation and Protest during World War I', *Journal of American History*, lxxxi (1995), 1562-83; and M. Ellis, 'W. E. B. Du Bois and the Formation of Black Opinion in World War I: A Commentary on the "Damnable Dilemma"', ibid., pp. 1584-90.

3 *Crisis* (Aug. 1917), pp. 163-4.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

They shall go down unto Life's Borderland,
Walk unafraid within that living Hell,
Nor heed the driving rain of shot and shell
That round them falls ...
And from their trembling
lips shall swell
A song of hope the world can understand ...
When age-long Faith, crowned with a grace benign,
Shall rise and from their blows cast down the thorn
Of Prejudice. E'en though through blood it be,
There breaks this day their dawn of liberty.[1]

The notion that the war would usher in a new day for black peoples captured the hearts of both reformers and poets, and Du Bois reiterated his belief that the war had transformative powers which, if channelled with energy and wisdom, could improve the plight of black Americans.[2]

Despite the pacifism of some leading NAACP officials, the association supported the US war effort and, like the *Crisis*, consistently tied events overseas to conditions at home. Its annual report for 1918 referred to the distinctive character of the Wilsonian crusade: 'The colored people of the nation, stirred as they have never been before by the idealism of an appeal to "make the world safe for democracy," have responded to the nation's call for service and sacrifice in such a high spirit of devotion ... as to have earned them the spontaneous tributes of the ... peoples of America and the Allied countries.' In a section entitled 'Stirred by War for Democracy', the report quoted Wilson's reasons for fighting – 'for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government' – and declared that the country's purpose matched the NAACP's purpose: to make 'democracy – at home and abroad ... the rule of American life and the aim of American statesmanship'.[3]

Even Villard, despite his deep discomfort with the war, saw opportunity in it, observing in January 1918 that it had the potential to improve the condition of blacks in America and throughout the world. Speaking in Philadelphia, he compared the deficiencies of democracy in Europe to those in the United States, in the hope that the comparison might lead his listeners to reflect on the need for change at home:

It is well of course that we should be helping the democracy of Germany to achieve a victory over the autocracy that dominated it, well that we should be

1 J. S. Cotter, Jr., 'A Sonnet to Negro Soldiers', *Crisis* (June 1918), p. 64.
2 Du Bois to Scott, 24 April 1918, Du Bois Papers, reel 7.
3 *Ninth Annual Report* [NAACP] (New York, 1919), pp. 19-21. See also, M. Storey, *The Negro Question: An Address Delivered before the Wisconsin Bar Association*, 27 June 1918.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

planning to make war impossible abroad and domination of subject races as well. But the most patriotic service to be rendered by Americans ... is ... to attack our own evils where they connote a failure or a denial of democracy that we may thereby strengthen the moral forces of the nation and make stronger ... the moral position the country has chosen to occupy. The worst are those who take the law within their own hands to wreak vengeance to glut a race prejudice ... [or] those who seek to undermine our own democracy by denying equality of opportunity, of justice, of self-government to [the] less advantaged ... For us as loyal Americans there is no more potent duty than to uphold the hands of the colored people and their leaders, and to dedicate ourselves to the spread of democracy throughout our land.[1]

According to Villard, true patriotism not only fought oppression overseas, but also at home. That a pacifist like Villard could point to the potential benefits from the war suggests the extent of its influence among race reformers.

In July 1918, Archibald Grimké, the head of the NAACP's Washington branch, wrote directly to Wilson, enclosing clippings from the *Washington Post* which documented lynchings throughout the country during the preceding six months, and urged him to speak out against it. Grimké explained that the figures, issued when it appears that

the fury of the German blow may fall at any time ... will not be happy reading to the thousands of colored Americans whose sons and brothers will help to stem this blow ... [Black Americans wanted to know if it was] worthwhile to send their sons and brothers to make the world safe for democracy when America, their home, is not safe for them ... they would want to know if the President, speaking the demands of this country for freedom of the oppressed peoples of distant lands ... cared whether his words were being compared by the civilized world with the attached record of unpunished ... lawlessness. This Association believes ... that you owe it to yourself to express your disapprobation of the lynching of colored men and women.[2]

Significantly, Grimké framed his request for a public repudiation of lynching by echoing Wilson's own speeches about the war, forcing Wilson to confront his own words – 'to make the world safe for democracy' – in an attempt to persuade him to act. Grimké added that the United States's international reputation was at stake, and that Wilson's failure would be seen as hypocritical in the eyes of the 'civilized world'.

Although the NAACP led the race reform campaign, it was not alone in tying reform to the war. The idea dominated the reform conversation,

1 [Harvard University, Houghton Library] Villard Papers, box 136, speeches. See also 'The Negro and the War', *New World* (Jan. 1918), pp. 17-19.
2 Grimké to Wilson, 1 July 1918 [Howard University, Archibald] Grimké Papers, box 27, fo. 549.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

appearing in the black press, magazines, speeches, and sermons. One of the most celebrated public declarations was made in August 1917 in the wake of two especially brutal episodes of racial violence in July, when thirty-nine blacks were killed in a riot in East St Louis, and a black prisoner, dragged from a Memphis jail, was burned to death. In response, Kelly Miller, a professor of sociology at Howard University and one of the country's leading black intellectuals, wrote an open letter to Wilson entitled 'Disgrace of Democracy', which sold a quarter of a million copies and was banned from US army posts. Miller asserted that black Americans did not feel part of the American democracy, and compared their plight to that of the oppressed nationalities of Europe and Africa. Calling Wilson 'the voice of the American people in the great world conflict' and the 'spokesman of world democracy', Miller reminded him that 'a chain is no stronger than its weakest link. A doctrine that breaks down at home is not fit to be propagated abroad ... If democracy cannot control lawlessness, then democracy must be pronounced a failure. The nations of the world have a right to demand of us the workings of the institutions at home before they are promulgated abroad.' Miller asked Wilson to use federal power to curb violent acts against black Americans, and warned him of the new spirit in the air: 'Negroes all over the nation are aroused as they have never been before ... [They now possess] a determined purpose that this country should be made a safe place for American citizens to live and work.'[1]

In his letter, Miller employed Wilsonian language in an effort to persuade the president to end violence against black Americans. He reconfigured the ideas about the oppression of ethnic minorities and the superiority of democratic institutions that Wilson had used in order to rally the nation in war to rally the oppressed black minority at home, and to legitimize the race reform campaign in the eyes of the country. If it was worth dying to guarantee freedom to those who were imperilled overseas, Miller argued, it was right to end racial persecution and give a full measure of democracy to every person in the United States.[2]

Similarly, Johnson often argued that one could not support democracy overseas without supporting it at home. In May 1917, he asked whether the country, as it prepared to enter the war 'in the cause of democracy and humanity, should not begin by clearing its own conscience', to enable it to fight 'in sincerity and not in hypocrisy? Cannot America, while she is

1 Miller to Wilson, 4 Aug. 1917, in K. Miller, *The Everlasting Stain* (New York, 1968; orig. 1924), pp. 136-60. For Miller, see B. Eisenberg, 'Kelly Miller: The Negro as Marginal Man', *Journal of Negro History*, vl (1960), 182-97 and A. Meier, 'The Racial and Educational Philosophy of Kelly Miller, 1895-1915', *Journal of Negro Education*, xxix (1960), 121-7.

2 K. Miller, *An Appeal to Conscience* (New York, 1918; repr. 1969), pp. 82-6.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

preparing to fight for democracy abroad, do something to remove the stain from democracy within her own borders?'[1] A few weeks later, on 24 May, Johnson again criticized the United States's war mission. He described the battle-cry 'to make the world safe for democracy' as 'nothing more than a bit of high-sounding phraseology', because the United States (and Britain) did not understand the meaning of democracy and lacked 'a gift that is anything like real democracy to give to the world'. With twelve million US citizens 'the victims of disfranchisement, of Jim-Crowism, and of lynch law', the notion that the United States was fighting for democracy was 'an absurdity'. Johnson nonetheless hoped that from the war 'a better democracy is coming ... The direct result of this great war will be the defeat of Germany ... the indirect results will be a fuller degree of liberty for the peoples of the world, especially the darker peoples.'[2]

Like many other race reformers, Johnson often argued that the First World War, which held the key to the future, had the potential to transform all manner of things, including the character of US race relations. In May 1917, he stated that the 'world today is being made over. Old traditions, old ideas, old conventions, old governments, old civilizations are ... being broken up and melted down in the crucible of this great war. And they are all to be shaped and moulded anew.' Was the black American going to take a hand in trying 'to shape and mould them for the good of his own future?', Johnson asked. 'The opportunity is here, but it is going to require serious thought and wise action.'[3]

Even before Trotter sailed for France to try to influence the peace conference, in June 1918 he appealed to Congress in the form of a petition on behalf of the National Liberty Congress, which the National Equal Rights League had organized in Washington. This was not the last time Trotter appealed directly to Congress in an attempt to apply Wilsonian ideals to black American conditions. The petition contained a catalogue of black grievances and demands, including an end to segregation locally and nationally and to disfranchisement, and a demand for federal protection against mob violence. The petition noted the substantial black contribution to the war effort, and spoke of black Americans' unsurpassed loyalty. It added that the United States risked weakening its 'moral position, prestige, and power' throughout the world so long as its domestic racial policies violated Wilson's 'noble pronouncements'. The war would fail to reach its goal – the democratization of all countries – unless the United

1 *New York Age*, 10 May 1917, p. 4.
2 *New York Age*, 24 May 1917, p. 4.
3 *New York Age*, 3 May 1917, p. 4; J. W. Johnson, 'What the Negro Is Doing for Himself', *The Liberator* (June 1918), pp. 29-31. For a typical expression of hope, see K. M. Johnson, 'The Negro and the World War', *Half Century Magazine* (June 1917), p. 13.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

States was made safe for democracy and Wilson's words were 'applied to all at home'.[1]

Similarly, Pickens – a noted speaker and regular contributor to the black press, who was adept at attracting support for the movement and became the NAACP's field secretary in 1920[2] – explained how black Americans would profit from the war. 'The colored American has gained, in both material and immaterial goods,' he wrote in January 1918, 'and will gain proportionately more from this world conflict, perhaps, than any other single element in the world.'[3] On 30 May, in a speech at Morgan College entitled 'The Kind of Democracy the Negro Expects', Pickens discussed the meaning of democracy and what black Americans expected from the war. Calling democracy 'the tune of the age ... the song to sing', he asked what blacks meant by democracy and why they were fighting. He answered that they sought democracy in the school, the workplace, the political arena, the church, and for women (because racial discrimination and 'sex preferment' went hand in hand), and for this programme, they would 'live and die'. Black Americans had joined the war effort in the belief that the United States and the Allies represented 'the best hope for such democracy'. The war gave blacks a unique opportunity: We 'welcome the opportunity to lift the "Negro question" out of the narrow confines of the Southern United States and make it a world question ... our domestic race question, instead of being settled by Mississippi and South Carolina, will now seek its settlement largely on the battlefields of Europe.'[4]

A forceful and distinctive voice on world affairs was heard from New York's *Messenger* magazine. Founded in November 1917 by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen as the successor to a union publication, the *Messenger* called itself 'The Only Radical Negro Magazine in America'. Taking a socialist line on world affairs, the *Messenger* was hard-edged, uncompromising, iconoclastic, and sought, self-consciously, to stand at the forefront of what would shortly be called the 'New Negro' movement. Randolph, whose star rose in the 1930s and 1940s, would become one of the towering figures in the twentieth-century civil rights movement.[5] Unlike most other race reformers, he and Owen perceived few potential benefits for black Americans from the war. Although they consistently tied the war to their discussion of civil liberties, their unyielding opposition to

1 *Congressional Record*, 65th cong., 2nd sess., appendix, 29 June 1918, p. 502.
2 For his life, see S. Avery, 'Up from Washington: William Pickens and the Negro Struggle for Equality, 1900-54' (Ph.D. dissertation, Oregon, 1970).
3 W. Pickens, 'The New Year' [New York, Schomburg Library], Pickens Papers [microfilm ed.], reel 4, box 7.
4 W. Pickens, 'The Kind of Democracy the Negro Race Expects', 30 May 1918, Pickens Papers, Pickens Vertical File.
5 T. Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair: Black Life and the Messenger, 1917-28* (Westport, 1975), p. 30.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

the conflict made them targets of the federal government, which hounded both men to keep them from fomenting trouble among the black population. After a speech in Cleveland in August 1918, they were arrested and charged with violating the Espionage Act. Although the charge was dismissed because the judge could not believe that these two 'boys' were capable of writing the anti-war literature the prosecutor entered into evidence, the government kept both of them and the *Messenger* under surveillance throughout the war. The department of justice later described Randolph as the 'most dangerous Negro in America'.[1]

Randolph and Owen saw the war as a competition among the Western powers for control of the developing world's natural and human resources and its trade routes. Greed had caused the war; the devaluation of labour the world over was the outcome:[2] 'Men are dying on the battlefield. Women are in poverty at home. Children are starving. Their music is the bitter cry of the children, the wailing of women, the groaning of wounded men.' Governments made war because that was what governments did. Peace might have been attained, they lamented, if 'only one-half of the billions which have been expended in this war had been expended on real education [then] men would not now be killing one another because they were born on a different strip of land'.[3]

In one sense, the *Messenger*'s analysis of the war was not tailored to appeal to an oppressed racial minority. The magazine argued that nations, like individuals, broke their words when self-interest forced them to do so, and that democracies, like the ruling classes, acted 'to secure advantage'. Viewing world politics through a socialist lens, the journal claimed that socialist governments would reduce or even abolish war. But Randolph and Owen took a broader view, which also incorporated the language and concerns of traditional race reformers.[4]

In a piece published in November 1917 entitled 'Making the World Safe for Democracy', the *Messenger* observed that Wilson's official reasons for US belligerency encouraged blacks to do their bit for the cause, but only in the hope of making 'a clean job of it'. The 'new Negro' had jettisoned the 'gospel of obey and trust', replacing it with one of 'rebel and demand. The deep, bitter injustices perpetrated upon [his] black brothers and sisters well up in [his] bosom like bitter root and gall.' The 'new Negro'

1 Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, pp. 3-4. See the special agent's report, which describes their activities (said to be in violation of the Espionage Act), arrest, and detention in [Library of Congress], A. Philip Randolph Papers [microfilm ed.], reel 23.

2 For Randolph's and Owen's thoughts on the war's origins, strikingly similar to Du Bois's, see *Terms of Peace and the Darker Races* (New York, 1917).

3 'Peace', *Messenger* (Nov. 1917), p. 7.

4 Ibid., Jan. 1918, pp. 17, 20. See also, P. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge, 1990).

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

demanded that the 'world must be made safe for them [because] until then it is not safe for democracy'.[1] Randolph and Owen were convinced that the war would help to create a more radical black American.

As the war entered its final stages, the race reformers, awash in optimism, began to consider the relationship between the peace settlement and their domestic agenda. If Wilsonians believed in the pliability of the international system, race activists looked at the domestic political and social order in much the same way. Recognizing Wilson's determination to reconstruct world politics, the race reformers saw the peace settlement as a propitious moment. Talk of reconstruction was in the air, for the United States as well as for the international system.

Illustrating the link between global and domestic reconstruction was a speech given in New York in November 1918 by John H. Hawkins, a black former college president and an official of the American Methodist Episcopal Church. In answer to the question, 'what does the Negro want?', Hawkins listed '14 Articles for Home Democracy', which the black press published throughout the country. Modelled on Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' of the preceding January, Hawkins's points contained the full range of the race reformers' demands: suffrage, improvements in education, housing, employment, and prisons, and an end to segregation. Hawkins concluded his remarks with words that echoed Wilson's. The 'time is ripe for a free and open conference between the races', he asserted. 'Let us get together and settle our differences and settle them right.'[2]

* * *

With the signing of the armistice at Compiègne on 11 November 1918, the victors experienced a mixture of joy, relief, and hope. Eight-and-a-half million combatants lay dead, more than twenty-one million had been wounded, and civilian casualties added several million more to this grim account. The great states of Europe lay prostrate; some would disappear forever. Nevertheless, the vision of a brighter world helped lift some of the shadows from the international stage and, as he had before, Wilson sought to illuminate a path the world might follow, confident that with his leadership a new international order could be constructed out of the rubble of the old.

In his first public statement on 11 November, Wilson claimed: 'A supreme moment of history has come. The eyes of the people have been opened and they see. The hand of God is laid upon the nations. He will

1 *Messenger* (Nov. 1917), p. 9.
2 J. H. Hawkins, '14 Articles for Home Democracy', *Washington Bee*, 16 Nov. 1918, p. 1; *Afro-American*, 15 Nov. 1918, p. 1.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

show them favour ... if only they rise to the clear heights of His own justice and mercy.'

Later that day, Wilson addressed Congress. Referring to 'these anxious times of rapid and stupendous change', he claimed the states that had banded together to destroy imperialism and militarism were now united both to 'set up such a peace as will satisfy the longing of the whole world for disinterested justice', and 'to satisfy and protect the weak as well as to accord their just rights to the strong'. Seeking nothing less than the transformation of world politics, Wilson would soon sail for Europe in order to make real his vision. Whether Wilsonianism was anything more than a string of mellifluous phrases would, in time, become known. While millions had perished, Wilson's enthusiastic reception upon arriving in France in December 1918 suggested that hope had not been a casualty of the war.[1]

The optimism of Europeans was shared by US race reformers, who believed that their moment, too, had arrived. After all, more than 350,000 black Americans had seen military service and Wilson had repeatedly described the war as a crusade for democracy. In his first post-war column, which pointed to the Wilsonian ideals for which the United States had fought, Johnson declared the time was ripe for black Americans to become 'articulate'; to 'proclaim and insist' that the United States live up to democratic ideals at home.[2]

With the war over, race reformers looked forward to a period of 'reconstruction', in which the diplomats' efforts in Paris to create a new world order might release the energy or even provide a model for the reconfiguration of US race relations.[3] Such optimism, evident in the writings of Miller, Pickens, and Ovington, even appeared in advertisements aimed at blacks. The Allied Industrial Finance Corporation of New York, for example, tried to attract black investors, hitherto ignored, by trumpeting the 'NEW IDEA, which in economics spells FINANCIAL DEMOCRACY'. Henceforth, blacks would take 'part in those interests of upbuilding which are so necessary in a developing and rehabilitating period' unlike any the world had seen. The corporation encouraged black Americans to take their place among the 'builders of the age' and during this 'process of reconstruction ... the world must be rebuilt financially ... physically and spiritually'.[4]

1 *Wilson Papers*, v. 53, 34-43.
2 J. W. Johnson, 'The Battle Begins', *New York Age*, 16 Nov. 1918, p. 4.
3 See the March 1919 conference that led to the establishment of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, which sought to improve race relations, in [Atlanta University, Woodruff Library], South: Commission on Interracial Cooperation Papers [microfilm ed.], series ii, reel 20.
4 The solicitation was sent to Du Bois: Du Bois Papers, reel 8.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

Miller's pamphlet, 'The Negro in the New Reconstruction', typified the hopefulness emphasized by many reformers just after the war. Observing that liberty was born out of travail, Miller stated that 'history abounds in convulsive epochs when the acute evils of society are eradicated.' The First World War was yet 'another act in the drama of human liberation' which would transform the world. Miller, who viewed the war as a battle between 'power and principle', believed it had made sacred the 'inviolability' of human rights; the 'gallant part' the black American had played in the quest for liberty would help to 'liberalize the feeling and sentiment' towards him. Miller predicted the 'whole fabric' of the United States would be transformed by 'the new democratic spirit', and declared that black Americans would become part of the nation's 'program of social justice and human opportunity'. The heat of the war's ideals would at last dissolve the glacier of legalized discrimination.[1]

In similar reflections on the potentialities of post-war reconstruction, Pickens observed that black Americans lived 'in the present and for the future'. The war, he claimed, would be followed by 'the greatest reconstruction period the nations have ever known ... [one] pregnant with both opportunity and danger.' Pickens compared war to a great fire, for 'it destroys old buildings that ought to have been destroyed long ago ... and it gives us the privilege of building new ideas into new structures.' The war showed that the 'Negro ... is a part of us ... he breathes our air ... and the soul that he has is American grown.' With the war at an end, Pickens claimed, the black American would expect 'to be nothing less than an American citizen with equal rights before the laws'.[2]

Ovington added her voice to the hopeful chorus. In a long essay published in the *Crisis* in February 1919 entitled 'Reconstruction and the Negro', Ovington wrote that six months before everyone had war on his mind, but now thought only of reconstruction. She wondered what advance would be made 'toward justice and humanity' for working men and women, small nationalities, and the so-called 'inferior races', all of them 'engaged in a separate struggle to secure something of value' for themselves in the pliable world of post-war chaos. Before systems solidified again, these groups sought 'to win the reality of democracy', with the 'American Negro', in particular, demanding the rights of citizenship. Like Hawkins, Ovington drew an analogy between Wilson's Fourteen Points and black

1 K. Miller, *The Negro in the New Reconstruction* (Washington, n.d.). The context suggests Miller wrote the essay just after the war ended.

2 W. Pickens, 'The Negro in the Light of the Great War: Basis for the New Reconstruction', (Baltimore, n.d.). The pamphlet, parts of which resemble speeches given by Pickens during this period, was probably written just after the war. The NAACP's president, Moorfield Storey, spoke in similar terms. See 'Race Prejudice', in M. Storey, *Problems of To-Day* (Boston, 1920), pp. 104-6.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

American aspirations for an end to lynching, segregation, and other forms of racial injustice. The 'oppressed Negro race' was coming into its own; while there was a long way to travel, 'a good start ha[d] been made along the road.'[1]

Three weeks after the armistice was signed, Du Bois sailed on 1 December for the peace conference on a mission with both domestic and international implications which, according to David Levering Lewis, 'would achieve historic and enduring symbolism'.[2] In Paris for more than three months, he had gone in the belief that 'the destinies of mankind' were centred there. Just before leaving, he wrote his first post-war editorial for the *Crisis*: 'The nightmare is over. The world awakes. The long, horrible years of dreadful night are passed. Behold the sun! ... It is done. We are sane. We are alive.'[3]

On the voyage, Du Bois shared a cabin with Lester Walton, a leading black journalist from New York, and Robert R. Moton, Booker T. Washington's successor at the Tuskegee Institute. Also aboard the ship, which carried the press corps to the peace conference, was George Foster Peabody, the philanthropist, who observed how fortunate it was that the two leading black American public figures should travel together. The trip would enable them 'to confer and map out ... a program' able to advance the 'single-minded cooperation of the colored people in this great crisis period ... when the future of the colored races is of so great moment'.[4]

Du Bois's mission had a threefold purpose: to gather material for a history of black Americans in the war; to act as the special representative of the *Crisis*; and to represent the NAACP in an effort to aid the cause of black people everywhere, a goal he pursued by summoning a Pan-African Congress at Paris in order to influence the disposition of Germany's African colonies.[5] Clearly, this was no assignment for the faint of heart. With supreme confidence in his ability to help transform world affairs, Du Bois resembled Wilson.

From February to April, while Du Bois was away, and in several issues after his return, the *Crisis* published a fascinating collection of insights and reflections on developments in France to show its readers the inextricable link between international developments and the black struggle. The connection was often made explicit. In May, the *Crisis* declared that a 'League

1 *Crisis* (Feb. 1919), pp. 169-73.
2 Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 564.
3 *Crisis* (Dec. 1918), p. 59.
4 Quoted in C. G. Contee, 'Du Bois, the NAACP, and the Pan-African Congress of 1919', *Journal of Negro History*, lvii (1972), 17.
5 See I. Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan-Africanism in America, Europe, and Africa* (New York, 1974).

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

of Nations is absolutely necessary' for 'Negro salvation ... to curb the anti-Negro policy of the United States'. In a curiously Wilsonian twist, the magazine claimed: 'what we cannot accomplish before the choked conscience of America, we have an infinitely better chance to accomplish before the organized Public Opinion of the World.'[1] By sending its most prominent black leader to France in an attempt to bring 'to bear all pressure possible on the delegates at the Peace Table in the interest of the colored peoples' at home and abroad, the NAACP acted on its conviction that an organic connection existed between overseas developments and the struggle at home.[2]

Some of the most striking pieces ever to appear in the *Crisis* describe conditions in France in the wake of the war. Its readers saw the ruin through the editor's eyes: post-war Paris in chaos and confusion, 'its soul cut to the core, feverish, crowded, nervous'; Toul dispossessed, 'its towers gloom dusky towards the murk of heaven'; and battlefields, 'the entrails of Rheims and the guts of Verdun, with their bare bones thrown naked to the insulting skies'. Du Bois wrote of French villages which 'in dust and ashes ... lay so low that they left no mark beneath the snow-swept landscape; walls that stood in wrecked and awful silence'. In the countryside, 'the trees, the land, the people were scarred and broken.' At Chateau-Thierry, 'shrapnel had broken across the dining-table and torn a mirror and wrecked a wall.' And everywhere the graves, evoking 'a certain breathless horror', broken only by 'plodding soldiers and fugitive peasants'. Throughout the United States, the *Crisis* scattered images of foreign desolation and despair.[3]

But Du Bois conveyed another side to events in France. All was not hopeless in the Old World; great events were unfolding that could help transform human affairs. Tears filled his eyes when he witnessed a ceremony in the Trocadero when a large crowd paid tribute to the part played by French colonial troops in the war. He described a black man, 'lithe, tall, and straight', receiving the Légion d'Honneur in the name of the president of the republic, and praised the French government for honouring the 'black and yellow men' who had given their lives. Once again, France was 'leading the world', and he wondered whether such a celebration would have been possible in the United States.[4]

1 *Crisis* (May 1919), pp. 10-11.
2 *Crisis* (Jan. 1919), pp. 111-12.
3 *Crisis* (Feb. 1919), p. 164; March 1919, pp. 215-16; April 1919, pp. 268-9.
4 *Crisis* (March 1919), p. 215. Lewis notes the irony in Du Bois's viewing the scene so uncritically. After all, the honours bestowed on a black man by his colonial master might have been expected to engender some measure of discomfort from the greatest race reformer of his generation. Lewis attributes this to Du Bois's 'eccentric Eurocentrism and radicalism-from-above': Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, pp. 566-7.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

One of Du Bois's key tasks in France was to gather material for a history of the black soldier during the war, a project he would never finish, though he published some of the material he collected in the *Crisis*. While his investigation of the treatment of the black soldier in France reveals but a small part of the complicated story of the black American's experience abroad during the First World War, the material he presented to the magazine's readers helped to shape their understanding of the overseas struggle.[1]

The *Crisis* told a tale at once distressing and inspiring. In May 1919, it revealed that the US military authorities had warned the French army the previous August not to treat black Americans as equals. In the United States, the French were told, the black man was seen as 'an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible'; black vices were a constant danger, especially the blacks' propensity for rape. Intimacy between French and black officers should be avoided – courtesy was acceptable, eating and shaking hands with black officers was not – along with undue praise for the blacks' performance in battle, lest it upset white enlisted men. Most important, great care should be taken to forestall sexual relationships between French women and black soldiers. In short, the US army sought to replicate US racial practices in France, without asking whether they might be inconsistent with the Allies' war aims. Although the *Crisis* stated that the French government had rejected the advice and ordered the destruction of the circular that proferred it, the US army's entrenched racism illustrated the hypocrisy underlying the war to 'make the world safe for democracy'.[2]

If white Americans were unable to overcome their age-old racial attitudes, according to Du Bois, the French, for the most part, treated the black soldier with dignity. Appreciative of the black Americans' contribution to the war effort, the French made them welcome. The *Crisis* explained that the inhabitants of one small French town, after some uncertainty, came to admire the 'forms, handsome, vigorous, and athletic', of the black American soldiers – these 'Children of the Sun' – whose faultless manners and upright bearing endeared them to everyone. When they left, tears fell, people promised to write, and one woman called out, 'you will always live in our hearts.'[3] On another occasion, the *Crisis* reported, a score of black soldiers sang the Marseillaise, with the mayor of Domfront

1 For black soldiers during the world war, see Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers* and Patton, *War and Race*, chs. 4-5.

2 *Crisis* (May 1919), pp. 16-18; Du Bois to the NAACP board of directors, 4 Jan. 1919, NAACP Papers, pt. 11B, reel 18.

3 *Crisis* (Feb. 1919), pp. 167-8. The story, written by a French woman, first appeared in a French newspaper.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

in the village inn high on a hill in Normandy, their 'vibrant voices' swelling as they sang. Never before had black Americans been 'so uplifted at the vision of real democracy dawning on them in France'. Despite the racial hatred among the white US officers present, the black soldiers revelled in a 'purling sea of French sympathy and kindliness'.[1]

Clearly, Du Bois was determined to draw a stark contrast between French and American treatment of the black soldier. After learning of the racial prejudice in the US ranks, subscribers read about the 'utter lack of prejudice' among the French. According to Du Bois, high-ranking Frenchmen, both inside and outside the army, vied with one another to show consideration to the black troops; their decency and fairness largely explained the support of blacks for the Allied cause. The discrepancy between French and US treatment of black Americans would leave its mark, for blacks would return home 'at once bitter and exalted!' They would no longer 'submit to American caste ... [and] will ever love France!'[2]

After returning to the United States on 1 April, Du Bois told his readers that he had gone to Paris because not to have gone would have been inexcusable. All the great nations, the little nations, 'the little groups who want to be nations', and the races – Jews, Indians, and Arabs – were there: 'not a single great, serious movement or idea in Government, Politics, [or] Philanthropy ... in the civilized world' had failed to send its 'Eyes and Ears and Fingers'. He had gone 'to help represent the Negro world in Africa and America and the Islands of the Sea'.[3]

Those who read the material Du Bois published undoubtedly experienced mixed emotions. While it is difficult to assess with certainty how his readers responded, they likely understood the connection between developments in Europe and the plight of blacks at home. By discussing the black American experience overseas, Du Bois tried to help his American readers gain a deeper understanding of the oppression they suffered in the United States.

In the months after the war, race reformers consistently turned to overseas events to inspire and energize their supporters. At a reception for returning black soldiers, the Reverend Francis Grimké reminded them of their duty to the cause of reform. Noting that the French had treated them well – 'you had to go away ... to breathe the pure, bracing air of liberty, equality, fraternity' – he told them that their trip would mean little to others unless they returned with the love of liberty and equality 'burning in [their] souls and the determination to set other souls on fire with the same

1 *Crisis* (June 1919), p. 63.
2 *Crisis* (March 1919), pp. 222-3.
3 *Crisis* (May 1919), p. 7.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

spirit'. They had the right to speak out for racial justice, he said, and must exercise it. Grimké concluded with a familiar but powerful refrain: 'If it was worth going abroad to make the world safe for democracy, it is equally worth laboring ... to make it safe at home.'[1]

At the NAACP's annual conference held at Cleveland in June 1919, speaker after speaker referred to the war and the peace settlement in an effort to galvanize support for the cause. According to Du Bois, ten thousand people attended the 'mighty meeting'. Its very theme, 'To Make America Safe for Americans', a reworking of Wilson's famous phrase, aimed to inject the notion of the United States's idealistic war aims into the gathering. Everyone present would have recognized the way their leaders infused global matters into the domestic message they presented to those working for reform.[2]

Pickens delivered an especially inspirational address, replete with wartime references. When 'the black man went to France it was with a desire to better conditions at home', he declared. 'When a black American shot a German in France he hoped he saw a lyncher die a spiritual death in the United States. It is true that the Negro thrust his bayonet harder in Europe when he thought of conditions in Georgia.' Asking what the First World War meant for black Americans, Pickens answered 'that we go up or down together ... When we put our colored men in the front line trenches we hoped they would be the equal of any soldiers. We understood how closely bound by destiny with us is the Negro; that his weakness is our weakness and his strength our strength.' The war proved that for the sake of the United States, black people must be the 'best black people that [they could] become', and in the post-war 'reconstruction' must work to get everyone 'into the right place': the 'Negro', he told his listeners, is surely part of America.[3]

Others at the conference who tied the war and the peace settlement to race reform included Emmett Scott, who had served as a special assistant to the secretary of war, Newton Baker, Joel Spingarn, and Charles Edward Russell. But the Reverend John Gregg, bishop of the American Methodist Episcopal Church, best captured the delegates' optimism by explicitly linking the reconstruction of the world to the reconstruction of the United States. Referring to the changed conditions and fresh outlook of black Americans in the wake of the war, Gregg spoke of the 'beginning of this new adjustment and reconstruction', in which a new 'Negro will never again fit into the old place he once occupied'. Remarking on the 'new

1 Grimké address, Washington, 24 April 1919, NAACP Papers, pt. 7A, reel 2; see also his speech, 24 Nov. 1918, in *The Works of Francis J. Grimké*, ed. C. G. Woodson (Washington, 1942), i. 559-77.
2 See NAACP press release, 12 May 1919, NAACP Papers, pt. 11A, reel 10.
3 Pickens's speech, 22 June 1919, NAACP Papers, pt. 1, reel 8.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

vision' that had come to the black man 'amid bursting shells in No Man's Land and before the fortress at Metz', he declared that nothing could force the black man back 'into that state of terrorism that once was his', for 'God Himself [had] put into the mouth of our chief executive the slogan of world democracy ... that ultimately the tenets of this mighty nation shall no longer be mere sweet sounding words, but a full reality.' Gregg concluded: 'Sometimes the darkness of despair seems almost impenetrable, but when I, standing on guard cry out, "Watchman, what of the night?", I get this reassuring answer, "The Morning cometh".'[1]

The optimism of the annual conference would soon collide with the reality of violence, death, and destruction. The summer of 1919 – Johnson called it the 'Red Summer' – caused such high-flying words to ring hollow, belying the assumption that the war might usher in an era of racial justice. From late spring through the autumn, race riots broke out wherever blacks and whites had been thrown together. In Longview (Texas), Charleston, Chicago, Knoxville, Omaha, Washington, D.C., and Elaine (Arkansas), there were more than twenty-five episodes in all, killing scores, injuring thousands, and destroying millions of dollars worth of property. The scope, severity, and depravity of the violence remain startling to this day.[2] While the riots had various causes, usually local, a common one was the collision between heightened black expectations for racial justice catalysed by the war, and white determination to stifle them. Johnson described the black outlook as combining 'bitterness, despair, and anger', and wrote of the emergence of a 'spirit of defiance born of desperation'.[3]

The war influenced the Red Summer in another more tangible way; it profoundly affected the black response to the brutal attacks by white Americans. In John Hope Franklin's words, having imbibed 'freely of the [war's] democratic doctrine', black Americans met their would-be oppressors with a new-found spirit of resistance.[4] Black Americans understood that, if the war had been fought to defend freedom and democracy, they must defend themselves as well. As a result, blacks fought back against whites, as they had rarely done before, turning some of the clashes into veritable race wars. In the wake of the First World War, black Americans stood ready to die in defence of life, home, and community.

1 Scott's address, 22 June; Russell, 26 June; Gregg, 25 June 1919, NAACP Papers, pt. 1, reel 8. For the resolutions passed at the Cleveland Conference, see NAACP Papers, pt. 11A, reel 10.

2 See A. I. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960s: A Study in the Connections between Conflict and Violence* (New York, 1967); W. M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York, 1984); and M. Ellis, 'J. Edgar Hoover and the "Red Summer" of 1919', *Journal of American Studies*, xxviii (1994), 39-59.

3 J. W. Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York, 1930; repr. 1991), p. 246.

4 J. H. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (7th ed., New York, 1994), p. 352.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

In the vanguard of this novel response to oppression stood the *Messenger*, which declared: 'This new spirit is but a reflex of the Great War.' At the height of the Red Summer, the magazine responded to the violence by once again interweaving events at home with world affairs. An editorial in July spoke of the 'Hun in America', described the vicious acts perpetrated by 'CIVILIZED AMERICA', and asserted that a nation that had put down the Hun in Germany should take care of the 'HUNS of Georgia'. But change was in the air; a new day was coming, for a 'new Negro is rising who will not compromise, surrender or retreat a single step'.[1] Perhaps the most celebrated expression of the new spirit was Claude McKay's poem, which the *Messenger* published in September 1919:

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.
> If we must die, O let us nobly die,
> So that our precious blood may not be shed
> In vain; ...
> Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying but – fighting back!

In language consistent with the end of a bloody war abroad and the start of a bloody summer at home, McKay captured the willingness of many black Americans, hundreds of thousands of whom had risked their lives to defend freedom overseas, to give their lives to defend freedom in the United States. As the *Messenger* asserted, the war had 'stiffened [the] back bone' of the 'New Negro', giving him a 'defiant eye' and 'a will of iron'.

McKay's poem typified the fare with which Randolph and Owen filled the pages of the *Messenger*. They repeatedly injected the war into their discussion of race reform, often with more than a hint of sarcasm. In September 1919, they observed that anyone who sought to achieve a desirable outcome in a just cause could do no better than follow the 'splendid example' of Wilson, who had summoned up 'force, unstinted force' in order to win the war. The lesson, they said, had 'penetrate[d] the minds of Negroes' and changed their 'demeanor and tactics'. Owing to the new war-bred spirit, black Americans would exact a toll on their oppressor; they were 'determined to make their dying a costly investment for all concerned'.[2]

The idea that the First World War had given birth to a new spirit among black Americans reached beyond the pages of publications such as the *Messenger*. Although the focus here is on the leaders of the movement for

1 *Messenger* (July 1919), p. 5.
2 *Messenger* (Sept. 1919), p. 4.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

race reform, it is worth pausing to listen to the voices of ordinary people as they reflected on race relations after the war. In Franklin's words, during these years black Americans 'began to see the discrepancies between the promise of freedom and the reality of their experience'. The war left them 'defiant, bitter, and impatient'.[1]

In 1919, Stanley B. Norvell, a black Chicagoan, described what the war meant to black Americans in a letter to the editor of the *Chicago Daily News* written one month after a bloody riot: 'Today we have with us a new Negro. A brand new Negro ... since the war the Negro has been jolted into thinking by circumstances ... I venture to claim that any average Negro ... of some education will tell you that he finally ... counts as a part of his government ... It took a world war to get that idea into general Negro acceptance, but it is there now.'

A few months later, Harry Jones, a black teacher at Lincoln High School in Wheeling, West Virginia, expressed a similar view. The Negro 'having given his best ... "to make the world safe for democracy", having had sounded repeatedly into his ears that all mankind is entitled to self-determination, has formed the opinion that Democracy ought to begin at home, and that he ought to share in the fruits of victory'. According to Jones, 'Negroes of all classes, from the radical to the conservative ... [believe] that America must change its treatment toward their race. They differ only as to means.'[2]

Soldiers, too, described how the wartime experience had created a new spirit. In letters to the editor of the *Crisis*, they described the war's impact on their view of race relations, and conveyed the feeling that upon returning, they would no longer accept their pre-war status. Writing from Le Havre in the summer of 1919, William Hewlett regretted that he would soon be coming home. Complimenting Du Bois on the August issue of the *Crisis*, and expressing his 'hearty approval of the contents therein', Hewlett claimed the United States was not democratic but 'autocratic' in dealing 'with her colored people', a realization that led him to wonder why it had gone to war at all. 'Was it to make democracy safe for white people in America – with the black race left out; if we have fought to make safe democracy for the white races, we will soon fight to make it safe for ourselves and our posterity.'[3]

1 Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 362. Reliable estimates of African-American opinion on the war are not easy to obtain. Theodore Kornweibel writes that 10 per cent of the black population actively opposed the war, forty to fifty per cent supported it, and the remaining forty to fifty per cent were either oblivious, apathetic, or cynical about the conflict. See T. Kornweibel, 'Apathy and Dissent: Black America's Negative Responses to World War I', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, lxxx (1981), 322-38.

2 H. Jones, 'Views of a Negro during the "Red Summer" of 1919', *Journal of Negro History*, li (1966), 209-18; *Crisis* (Oct. 1919), pp. 304-5.

3 *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, 1877-1934*, ed. H. Aptheker (Amherst, 1973), i. 234-5.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

In the summer of 1919, Trotter journeyed to Washington to testify at a hearing of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge's Foreign Relations Committee, which had convened to consider amendments to the peace treaty.[1] On behalf of the National Equal Rights League, he suggested amendments to the treaty that focused on racial equality.[2] The testimony of Trotter and seven colleagues before *this* committee in particular suggests how closely civil rights leaders linked the reconstruction of the post-war world to the advancement of blacks in the United States.

Trotter tied the war to the cause of race reform by stating that the war had been fought 'for a great human principle ... to procure universal security of life and the protection of the weak from the strong'. It was essential, he asserted, to amend the treaty to ensure that soldiers 'of every race and color' who had given their lives would not have died in vain, and that 'we may truly have ... the reign of world democracy and ... universal liberty.' His proposed amendments read in part: 'the allied and associated powers undertake ... to assure full and complete protection of life and liberty to all their inhabitants, without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race, or religion and agree that all their citizens ... shall be equal before the law and shall enjoy the same civil and political rights without distinction as to race, language, or religion.'

Turning to the protections afforded to other racial minorities at the peace conference, Trotter claimed that no others 'suffered the denials of democracy and the insecurity of life and liberty' to the same degree as black Americans, and urged the committee to adopt his amendments in order to ameliorate 'the terrible condition, the deplorable condition, the cruel condition' of blacks in the United States. In conclusion, Trotter stated that he had testified so that 'colored Americans ... with all other nations on the earth, shall come into the enjoyment of full democracy, of full equality of rights, [and] of full liberty.'[3] One is struck by how completely he wedded Wilson's global aspirations to the domestic aspirations of the US race reformer.

Du Bois, too, saw the meliorative powers of the peace settlement as a prerequisite for the construction of a more just society abroad and at home. The League of Nations, for example, was 'absolutely necessary to the salvation of the Negro race'. Without a 'supernational power to curb

1 For the domestic debate on the treaty, see W. C. Widenor, *Henry Cabot Lodge and the Search for an American Foreign Policy* (Berkeley, 1980) and T. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York, 1992).

2 For the 'racial equality' question at the peace conference, see P. G. Lauren, 'Human Rights in History: Diplomacy and Racial Equality at the Paris Peace Conference', *Diplomatic History*, ii (1978), 257-78.

3 Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Treaty of Peace with Germany*, 66th cong., 1st sess., 28 Aug. 1919, pp. 679-98.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

the anti-Negro policy of the United States ... we are doomed eventually to *fight* for our rights,' whereas the League would oppose the doctrines of 'race antagonism and inferiority', and would be open to 'the larger influences of civilization and culture' which Southern barbarism had negated in the United States. He concluded his paean to the League in positively Wilsonian language, albeit with a Du Boisian twist:

> What we cannot accomplish before the choked conscience of America, we have an infinitely better chance to accomplish before the Organized Public Opinion of the World. Peace for us is not simply Peace from Wars like the past, but relief from the spectre of the Great War of Races which ... [could only be prevented] by a Great World Congress in which black and white and yellow sit and speak and act. It is the Beginning of a mighty End.[1]

* * *

But these were only words. One might reasonably ask whether the reformers' language was anything more than eloquent chatter, with little impact on race relations in the United States. After all, in 1919 the millennium in the struggle for racial equality had hardly arrived: the Red Summer proved that. The movement's great achievements were decades away. Nevertheless, the years from 1914 to 1919 provide a striking illustration of the way race reformers used events overseas to advance their domestic agenda. Without the First World war, the language of race reform – the content of the message and the way it was presented to the American people – would have been fundamentally different. The reformers' persistent reference to events abroad demonstrates how the war and the peace settlement defined the language of the domestic struggle in these years, supplying the movement with a new vocabulary.

In considering the course of reform movements, one must look closely at the way their leaders frame their message, for this is how they try to attract support for their programme. The material out of which reformers fashion a language of persuasion – how they shape it, what they emphasize and why – is crucial to the effort to bring about political and social reform. The language of persuasion is, after all, how reformers seek to achieve tangible goals such as the passage of legislation or victory in the courtroom. And ultimately, such language is closely related to the most fundamental of all goals on the reform agenda: the transformation of beliefs and values that allows for social progress.[2] If one hopes, therefore, to understand how the race reformers sought to effect change in the United States during the First

1 *Crisis* (May 1919), pp. 10-11.

2 For language and the framing of the message, see R. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (New York, 1978), pp. vii-xii and G. Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, 1973), ch. 3.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

World War, one must examine the extent to which their language was permeated with references to the struggle overseas and to the peace settlement.

The significance of the First World War does not end there, for the reformers' incorporation of overseas events into their vocabulary affected the movement in another way. In addition to giving shape to the race reformers' message, the First World War also had what economists might call a 'multiplier effect' on the movement.[1] In the wake of the war, the movement showed new vitality and attracted many new supporters. In May 1919, in one of his most celebrated editorials, 'Returning Soldiers', Du Bois wrote explicitly of the relationship between the war and the domestic struggle against racial oppression:

> We *return*.
> We *return from fighting*.
> We *return fighting*.
> Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.[2]

His readership in the *Crisis* – the pre-eminent publication devoted to the race question – was 100,000. Five years earlier it had stood at 31,000.[3] And membership in the NAACP itself rose equally dramatically: in April 1918, the NAACP had 9,869 members in eighty-five branches; eighteen months later, the numbers had risen to 91,203 members (90 per cent of them black and most living in the South) in 310 branches.[4] By 1920, the NAACP had become a national organization and the undisputed leader in the struggle for racial equality. These developments would have been unimaginable without the First World War.

In the race activists' determined effort to lend traction to the crusade for racial justice, which led them to incorporate the war, and specifically Wilsonian ideas, into the rhetoric of reform, they energized the struggle to build a genuine democracy in the United States. Their barrage of war-related activities – speeches and sermons, news stories and editorials, conferences, debates, and petitions, testimony before Congress, and the voyages to France – helped to attract greater numbers to the crusade. If, in 1919, it was not yet clear how receptive the nation would be to this growing

1 Rosenberg, 'How Far the Promised Land?'

2 *Crisis* (May 1919), p. 14.

3 'Report of the Director of Publications and Research and Editor of the *Crisis* for the Year 1919', p. 7, Du Bois Papers, reel 9.

4 To trace the NAACP's rapid growth, see the following issues of the *Crisis*: Aug. 1918, pp. 172-4; Oct. 1918, p. 274; Jan. 1919, p. 122; April 1919, pp. 284-5; Aug. 1919, p. 190. See also the minutes of the mtgs. of the board of directors, 8 Sept. and 10 Nov. 1919 in NAACP Papers, pt. 1, reel 1.

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017

commitment to work for racial justice, it is apparent that the First World War and the peace conference at Paris had profoundly influenced the way race reformers in the United States articulated their message. Equally important, in seeking to generate support for the movement, the race reform leadership had successfully used events overseas to enlist the help of tens of thousands of newly committed activists, many of whom would continue to serve as the foot soldiers of reform in the arduous battles to come.

University of Virginia

Downloaded by [UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON] at 02:44 18 October 2017